

Are Boys in Crisis? Will Single-Sex Classrooms Help?

By JEFFREY THOMAS

Educators challenged by gender gap in achievement.

Co-education for decades has been considered as American as apple pie. At the higher education level, there were more than 200 single-sex colleges for women in 1960, but today there are fewer than 60. Of the 250 all-male colleges in the mid-1960s, only a few remain entirely male today.

On the primary and secondary level, only private and parochial schools have offered single-sex classrooms until recently, but that is beginning to change. Where only 11 public schools offered single-sex classrooms six years ago, in fall 2008, around 500 will, according to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education, a group that sees them as beneficial to both boys and girls.

The reason for renewed interest in single-sex classrooms: a vocal minority of educators, psychologists and parents perceives boys and young men as not doing as well as their female counterparts and perhaps even being in crisis.

A striking gender gap in educational achievement has emerged since the mid-1990s. A study released in 2006 by the American Council on Education found that, since that time, the percentage of white women with bachelor's degrees has continued to increase—a trend that began in the 1960s—while the percentage of similarly educated white men has remained essentially flat. Among African Americans, the group with the largest



gender gap, males saw some progress with their share of enrollment rising from 37 percent in 1995-96 to 40 percent in 2003-04.

About 33 percent of young women in the age group of 25 to 29 years had a bachelor's degree or more in 2007, compared with 26 percent of their male counterparts. Except in a few fields such as engineering and computer sciences where males remain dominant, females are earning an increasing percentage of degrees—six in 10 of the degrees in the biological sciences and more than three-quarters of the degrees in such fields as education and psychology.

At the primary and secondary level, boys are more than 50 percent more likely than girls to repeat grades in elementary school, much more likely to drop out of high school, and twice as likely to be identified with a learning disability,

according to the U.S. Department of Education. Three-quarters of girls graduate from high school, while only two-thirds of boys do; an Urban Institute study estimates that more black girls graduate from high school than black boys.

However, a recent report on gender equity in American education discounted talk of a “boys’ crisis,” finding both American boys and girls have made remarkable strides in education, and that there is no evidence that the gains made by girls have come at the expense of boys.

The critics maintain such a crisis exists not just in the United States but in many countries. Single-sex classrooms are at least part of the answer, they say.

“Single-sex classrooms can advantage girls without disadvantaging boys, and vice versa,” says Leonard Sax, a physician and psychologist who has urged teachers to be more aware of gender differences in



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Far left: Darius Phifer (left), Travis Brown and Alexander Greene at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School in Atlanta, Georgia. The sixth and seventh grade students are divided by gender at the school. Left: Southern Leadership Academy Assistant Principal Bill Redmon answers questions during a boys’ lunch period. The Louisville, Kentucky-based school has separated all classes on the basis of gender.

the classroom. “Gender-blind education leads paradoxically to a strengthening of gender stereotypes, with the result that fewer girls take courses in physics, computer science, trigonometry and calculus,” says Sax, who serves as executive director for the National Association for Single Sex Public Education.

Sax cites research indicating boys and girls respond to stress and competition differently. Researchers have also noted the brain develops differently in boys and girls and is wired differently, he says. As a result, while boys and girls can learn the same things, the best ways to teach them

may be quite different, especially when it comes to mathematics and the sciences.

“The real gender gap is not in ability but in motivation—not in what girls and boys can do, but in what girls and boys want to do: specifically, in what they want to learn, and how they want to learn it,” Sax wrote in *Education Week* in June.

Experts such as Richard D. Kahlenberg of the Century Foundation, a public policy research institution, however, oppose separating kids by gender: “Policies that are going to purposely segregate students by race or gender or income or religion

are antithetical to what American public education is supposed to be about, which is to bring children of different backgrounds together.”

A new groundbreaking study in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* found that preschool boys benefit developmentally from being in a classroom that has a majority of girls while they fall steadily behind in learning skills in an all-boys environment. The proportion of boys in the classroom was found to have no effect on the girls’ development. This is just one study and involved only preschoolers, but such results suggest that any picture of the optimum learning environment for boys is likely to get more complex rather than simpler.

For more information:

National Association for Single Sex Public Education

<http://www.singlesexschools.org/home.php>

U.S. Department of Education study on public single-sex schools

<http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/other/single-sex/characteristics/index.html>

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